

Fake Orgasms and Knowing to Cum Better by Coming to Know Better

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Muncie, IN

April 2020

Expected Graduation Day:

May 2020

Abstract

This thesis connects the literature in the psychology of sexuality to that of epistemology to argue that there are instances of injustice that occur during seemingly permissible sex. I use this pairing to argue that because epistemic injustices can occur during consensual sex, not all consensual sex is ethically right. However, because epistemic injustices are relevant during sex, so are displays of epistemic virtue. I apply the importance of epistemic virtue to Katherine MacKinnon's charge that sex in patriarchy is wrong by highlighting ways men and women can be epistemically virtuous in such a way that avoids her concerns. I begin by arguing that fake orgasms, a common sex act among women, represent an instance of performative smothering. Performative smothering is an injustice that happens when someone is unable to share testimony about their knowledge because they know that their audience will be unable to recognize them as having knowledge, while nonetheless putting forth a performance that matches the testimony the audience wants to hear. Fake orgasms, an instance of performative smothering, are both epistemically and sexually wrong because they deprive women of sexual pleasure, and because men harm women in their ability to know about and share knowledge regarding their own sexuality. Since harms like fake orgasms regularly occur during sex, some sex we think is right is actually wrongful in some ways. This coheres with MacKinnon's charge that because sex is predicated on power imbalances between men and women, all sex is violent, and thus sex in patriarchy is wrong, even if consent is obtained. I challenge this conclusion by identifying ways that epistemic virtue can be employed to co-create a consensual sexual exchange that is not coerced and is absent of ethical wrongs, even in the presence of sex acts associated with dominance and submission. I conclude that our capacities as knowers are critical to evaluating the rightness, and determining the quality, of our sexual exchanges with others.

Content Warning: explicit sexual language, descriptions of sexual interactions, discussions of sexual violence.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Juli Thorson for her caring guidance through this often awkward and challenging topic. I especially thank her for providing honest and critical feedback regarding my own limited intuitions about the experience of female sexuality. Her guidance kept me grounded both to the content and quality of my work; besides thanking her for her help on this product specifically, thanks for helping me grow in my confidence and self-efficacy.

Thank you to Dr. Dave Concepcion for giving me the conceptual and mechanical tools to write well, and for providing me with a model of healthy masculinity I can use as a reference in my own life and theorizing. Special thanks for providing a way of talking about the male role in the complicated and problematic world of sexuality that is not necessarily self-blaming, but is self-accountable.

Thanks to my peers who are women for informing my thinking about a primarily female experience, fake orgasms, and for ensuring I avoid dogmatism and misrepresentation. Thanks also to the men who affirmed my articulation of our role in the wrongs of sexuality, and for helping me keep my own wrongs in check.

Thanks to Dr. George Gaither for introducing me to the academic world of sexuality studies, and for helping me identify how to approach sexual topics with a charitable, open, and unabashed mind.

Process Analysis Statement

The process of writing this thesis fell into three parts and was completed over about three semesters. The first stage involved narrowing my interest in sexuality and epistemology to a particular topic. The second stage involved preparing a research question that avoided ‘speaking for others,’ and instead was located primarily in experiences I can speak to meaningfully. The final and most complicated stage involved actually compiling research in the diverse fields of psychology of sexuality and epistemology, preparing an argument, and writing this manuscript.

The first stage of this thesis began in the spring of 2019 as I was in Dr. Thorson’s epistemology class. I was developing an interest in the epistemology of sexuality throughout the course of the class. I noticed, as we learned about the themes of how particular kinds of knowledge are only available to particular social positions, that because of our political and moral denigration of sexuality, many of us do not hold knowledge about sexuality. I was interested at first in articulating a structural explanation of male sexual ignorance. I wanted to write on why men do not know about female sexual pleasure specifically, and generally, why dialogue around sexuality is stunted. I quickly discovered that this task would require a book of writing, so I had to narrow my goal. Along the way of thinking about male sexual ignorance, I had thought fake orgasms were a good example of male ignorance. I decided to write on fake orgasms in the summer of 2019. This was a challenging decision because fake orgasms are something men, by my own account, do not understand; it seemed I was setting myself up for failure. Fortunately, I was able to read fake orgasms through the theories of Kristie Dotson, enabling me to think about the topic in a more meaningful way than my own experiences of, and

pop knowledge regarding, fake orgasms. In the fall of 2019, I did my psychology research capstone on the topic of fake orgasms, grounding me to the empirical evidence about women's experiences with fake orgasms, further broadening my view.

I had developed a sense of the empirical facts, but something Dr. Thorson kept bringing up was the absolute imperative of avoiding 'speaking for others.' Developing an argument that cohered with this goal was my next big task. Speaking for others is a serious epistemological concern in which a powerful agent removes the capacity for a disempowered person or group to understand and articulate their own experiences. This can be problematic because the conceptual tools and ignorances of the speaker can misrepresent the represented experiences and interests, all while taking epistemic power from the represented group or person. To avoid this concern, I have tried my best to avoid articulating what women do or should experience, and instead have described, from a male perspective, the framework hoisted by patriarchy that causes things like fake orgasms to occur. I attempt to avoid speaking for women by describing the causes of fake orgasm in terms of men's roles in creating and maintaining unhealthy power dynamics, and by giving recommendations that apply to men as knowers and as lovers. To speak from a man's perspective, I focus on taking the testimony of women at face value, and use that testimony to give evidence for my framework of how male power causes sexual injustices, rather than questioning the testimony itself.

The final stage was compiling research -- a task aided by my research capstone in fall of 2019 -- and writing this manuscript. I wrote this manuscript over the course of the spring of 2020, largely independently. I gained insights and clarifications from Dr. Thorson, but generally, she affirmed the quality of my independent work. The most pivotal moment in this part of the

process (most of it was pretty cut-and-dry: writing, editing, citing...) was learning about the argument from Katherine MacKinnon in Dr. Thorson's and Dr. Dave Concepcion's class Feminist Ethics and Epistemology. This argument rocked my world. MacKinnon claims that because sexuality is constructed such that male dominance and female submission are the fabric of sexual arousal and sexual pleasure, all sexual exchanges in patriarchy are wrong. They are premised on the unjustified exertion of control of one person onto another, who is reduced to a sex object. As an aspiring sex therapist and someone who has personally experienced and witnessed in others the existential, relational, and potentially spiritual goods of sexuality, I was deeply troubled by this argument. Was my benefit garnered off of harming my partners, I worried quite intensely. While recognizing genuine mistakes in my history, I had to deny that all the sex I've known to happen has been wrong: I know factually, from my experiences and the testimony of some women, that sex is often beneficial, even if MacKinnon's concerns apply. So a large part of compiling my manuscript and argument has been tailoring it to be able to produce a counter-argument to MacKinnon. This was done after already finishing my argument about the wrongs of fake orgasms. I thought that if knowing badly (by causing epistemic injustices, i.e., fake orgasms) can make sex wrong, can knowing well make sex right? And so I endeavoured to re-shape my argument to argue that good knowing can make for good sex.

Above are the pertinent details in the process of compiling this thesis. Hopefully my argument holds true to my goals: to maintain a thin enough research question to be accomplishable in a thesis; to not speak for others; and to articulate a way in which sex can be right, even in a patriarchal world that endeavours to make it wrong.

Fake Orgasms and Knowing to Cum Better by Coming to Know Better

“My body speaks

In languages only you can speak in...

Is it that you can't hear me clearly?”

- Echoes, *Say It*

Introduction

This thesis establishes important links between the conceptual content of social epistemology and the philosophy of sexuality. Primarily, this thesis seeks to understand fake orgasms, an artefact of patriarchal influence on sexuality, as revealing an unjust distribution of sexual knowledge and pleasure. The conclusions garnered from that argument will reveal insights into how knowledge and sexuality interact by highlighting the testimonial elements of sex. This demonstrates how ignorances regarding sexuality are problematic for couples forging a reciprocally beneficial sexuality in today's world. I emphasize how sexual partners interact not only as gendered, embodied agents, but also as epistemic agents -- this affects what we consider to be good sex and healthy sexualities. To accomplish this task, this thesis makes two arguments that pivot around fake orgasms performed by women during heterosexual sex -- one articulating how fake orgasms represent injustices, and another about how to ameliorate these injustices -- before applying the conclusions of these arguments to Katherine MacKinnon's charge that sex in patriarchy is wrong. The epistemic arguments about fake orgasms and the corresponding prescriptions I provide to avoid the injustices of fake orgasms are indentured to articulating how MacKinnon fails to apprehend the epistemic facet of our personhood as it applies to sexual exchanges with others.

Statement of Intent, Assumptions, and an Introduction to the Philosophy Of Sexuality

This thesis does not intend to speak for women. It does not attempt to reach into women's reality to draw out some greater truth about fake orgasms for women; I am not a mouthpiece of women's reality. To the extent I articulate women's reasons for faking orgasms, I rely on the testimony and understanding of women. My intent is not to question the content of this testimony -- I attempt to practice epistemic trust, the virtue of trusting knowers to know their own experience -- but rather to use my experience of living a masculine sexuality in tandem with women's testimony to describe a framework of sexual attitudes and beliefs that harm women. The extent to which I succeed in this cannot be judged by my intention: hopefully my writing stays honest to my goal. While I am not a woman and will never understand sex as one, my understanding is framed by the experiences of women I know, and with women's theories and data.

Sex is necessarily intersubjective. I cannot talk about heterosexual sex without talking about what sex is like for women, to the limited extent I can understand those experiences. I speak as a male, a male partner, and as someone interested in improving sex for primarily women, but also for men. At its best, I understand this thesis to be a man's understanding of how male sexuality is frequently mistaken when male sexuality is considered in light of a rich literature of women's discourse on sexuality. I wish to append my perspective to this literature to describe ways men can be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the harms that women articulate about sex. The aim of this sensitivity is to encourage better sex. I mean 'better' here in a dual sense: yes, 'better' in terms of more pleasure, intimacy, and so forth, but primarily 'better' in terms of fewer injustices and fewer harms. Such is my motivation for researching this topic. It

appalls me that our sexual reality is constructed in a way that discounts female pleasure, knowledge of female sexuality, and female sexual and epistemic autonomy. I wish to do something, as a partner to some women and as a future sex therapist, to help couples (and myself!) rectify injustices in their sex and thus have better sex.

I should be clear. From the perspective of some women faking a particular orgasm, some fake orgasms are perfectly okay. Some women fake orgasms for fun and for erotic reasons.¹ Even if the reasons for faking are not fun or erotic, often faking orgasm is superior to other alternatives like upsetting one's partner, as this thesis will argue. Accordingly, this thesis is not a condemnation of the particular sexual practice of fake orgasms, but rather a polemic of male sexuality and sexual ignorance as each can be understood through some instances of fake orgasms. This thesis is about sexual and epistemological injustice, not fake orgasms as a sexual practice. I think that in most cases, women and men can agree that fake orgasms are not preferred to genuine female orgasms, so insofar as male sexuality evokes fake orgasms, we men have reason to change. This thesis is a man's understanding of why fake orgasms happen in a patriarchal world, the relevant injustices that cause them, and what men should do to be aware, and self-critical, of how their sexuality can cause both sexual and epistemological harms.

Clearly, this thesis takes sex and sexual pleasure seriously. It may be considered 'sex-positive,' but I prefer to say 'sex-affirming.' Sex-positivity, in my eyes, takes the category of sex as being unilaterally good; all things considered sex are good. I am sex-affirming because while I think sexuality has tremendous potential to be a fountainhead of joy, intimacy, satisfaction, spirituality, and pleasure, and I support any sex that mutually reaches towards those

¹ Erin B. Cooper., Allan Fenigstein, and Robert L. Fauber. "The Faking Orgasm Scale for Women: Psychometric Properties." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43, no. 3 (2013): 427.

or similar values, the category of sex itself is nonetheless neither good nor bad. Sex is bad when it does not mutually promote values of the kinds mentioned, or is actively harmful, and good when it promotes those values. This thesis will articulate ways that much of the sex we have is bad, and some ways it can become better. As Fanon says, “today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its imperfections, its perversions.”²

I will write primarily about heterosexual couples -- compared to non-heterosexual couples, straight sex is where I see many more of Fanon’s “perversions.” The choice to focus on straight sex is not a matter of avoiding or erasing non-heterosexual couples, but a matter of where fake orgasms, and thus the injustices I am interested in, themselves occur. Fake orgasms are by far most common among heterosexual couples, least common among lesbians, and are intermediately common among gay men and bisexual people.³ This fact spurred my interest in articulating fake orgasms as artefacts of sexual injustice: what is it about straight sex and how it is constructed that causes straight women, but not lesbians, to frequently fake orgasms? Is it that lesbians have more orgasms, or face less need to appear as though they are having one? Without more data and conversation with lesbians I cannot say, but I imagine it is a mixture of both. Besides heterosexual couples, I also talk mostly about longer-term couples, as these are the couples that can meaningfully employ some of my positive suggestions. Much of the description of how fake orgasms happen applies to any heterosexual sex act, however, be it between long-time lovers or during a hookup.

² Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. (London: Penguin Classics): 2020, pg 28.

³ Owen Miller, “Reasons for Fake Orgasms Among Women as Mediated by Sexual Esteem,” Personal Collection [unpublished research] (2019).

There is a distinction in the philosophy of sexuality between non-ideal and ideal sex.⁴ Ideal sex is defined as consensual sex that involves the Sartrean concept of double reciprocal incarnation-- sex is ideal when both partners have their consciousness “drawn to the skin,” such that interacting with the body of a partner feels as though you are interacting with your partner’s *personhood* in a deeply embodied way.⁵ This concept draws attention to how mutual desire and attraction are a key part of healthy sexual interactions. While I question the “double” qualifier -- why not triplicate, quadruple, etc -- part of my project is to highlight the imperative of communication during sex, which aids in drawing your lovers’ consciousness to their skin. A woman who can freely ask her partner for this-or-that stimulation has a mind much nearer her skin than a woman who is silent in fear of offending her partner’s ego. A man able to respond to the actions and reactions of his partner with loving attention puts his consciousness in his body by embodying his care for her. Contrary to ideal sex is non-ideal sex. It is those instances of sex that are consensual and often enjoyable, but do not involve double reciprocal incarnation. This thesis discusses fake orgasms as possible only during non-ideal sex: if personhood is on the skin, honest communication will happen before the woman truncates her testimony about her experience. In this way, this thesis drills down on epistemological, moral, and sexual reasons to communicate during sex, insofar as injustices associated with fake orgasms give reason to be motivated towards having more ideal sex.

My intent, in short, is to articulate a reason and method to have morally, epistemologically, and sexually better sex. I do this by pointing at empirical ways having an

⁴ There is also morally wrong sex -- sex that does not involve consent, or has consent that is coerced. I will discuss this more later.

⁵ Don E. Marietta. *Philosophy of Sexuality*. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe): 1997.

uncritically accepted male sexuality harms women. If harming women and their sexuality is not enough (it should be!) to make readers care about fake orgasms, then at least consider that ‘pleasure begets pleasure.’ Even if male readers are, wrongly, not too concerned about female sexual pleasure, we certainly are concerned about our own, and thus we should take the ways our sexuality neglects our partners’ pleasure seriously.

Argumentative Outline

After a brief exposition as to why testimonial and epistemic concerns are relevant to sexuality, this thesis first argues that fake orgasms are a kind of testimony that reveals epistemic harms against women. Generally, any sort of copulatory vocalization -- the moans, groans, and short phrases that mutually direct a sexual exchange -- involves testimony. A moan or request for a certain kind of stimulation communicates the known contents of a sexual experience to a partner. I show how instances of testimonial smothering -- the inability to share your truth because you know the audience will not hear you or will view you negatively -- occur regarding copulatory vocalizations. Women may smother themselves because they are unable to express their knowledge of what sexual experiences they desire due to failures of the male partner. Instances of smothering like this are significant because communication is the crux of a mutually constructive sexuality. Fake orgasms have a component of smothering as well insofar as women cannot profess their lack of pleasure or orgasm, but fake orgasms also involve the expression of a falsehood that contradicts the female partner’s experiences. The contents of a sexual experience are falsely reported to the male partner such that the male partner is made to believe that the experience for her is better than it actually is.

With this in mind, I argue that if a man has more power in sexual exchanges and tacitly expects his partner to receive his sexual performance with pleasure and/or orgasm, then his partner is motivated to engage in performative smothering about her felt sexual experience by faking orgasm. Performative smothering refers to when a knower fabricates false testimony because she anticipates that her audience will respond negatively to her knowledge (mere smothering⁶), simultaneous to her awareness of an expectation to gratify the hearer with information that contradicts her truth. Because the deceitful component of performative smothering emerges from failures of the hearer, falsehoods of this kind, including fake orgasms, are blameless. Along the exploration of this argument, I also discuss how sexual knowledge and power interact such that most performances of fake orgasms are done by women rather than men.

This understanding of fake orgasms entails a multifaceted injustice. The injustice has to do with both epistemic and sexual goods. Smothering oneself means being victim to an epistemic violence, which is any harm to a subject's capacities as a knower. When smothering herself, a female partner may, compared to other outcomes, develop less knowledge about her and her partner's body and sexuality when she fakes an orgasm. She is also neglected as a knower of her own embodied experiences. Further, when performative smothering happens during sex, the female partner is encouraged to repudiate her own desires and frustrations to instead embody a visage of pleasure that the male prefers. This is epistemically unjust in a way that is worse than mere smothering because she questions not only her knowledge, but the way in which she knows her own pleasure. She may come to think she is wrong to want more pleasure, as is indicated by many women's tacit acceptance of not having orgasms during sex.

⁶ Kristie Dotson. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 244.

Since some women are pressured to choose fake orgasms over more pleasurable outcomes, I identify a uniquely sexual injustice regarding the distribution of heterosexual pleasure. Even if orgasms are not the necessary goal of sexual exchanges and the lack of orgasm is acceptable to the female partner, performing fake orgasms still perpetuate an injustice in the distribution of sexual pleasure. It may emotionally and cognitively detract from the quality of the sex. Energy spent developing the conviction to, then actualizing an, fake orgasm is energy not spent on enjoying your and your partner's body. Even if authentic orgasms are not the goal per se, in the absence of reasons to not pursue an orgasm, most individuals would prefer to have an orgasm over faking one. If actual orgasm is generally preferred but prevented by the operations of masculine power, or smothering detracts from the erotic-emotional quality of the sex, then fake orgasms are sexually unjust for the performer.

Injustices should be avoided when possible. As such, I provide a short set of recommendations for male partners which encourage men to take responsibility for their role in causing fake orgasms and the corresponding epistemic-sexual injustices. These recommendations primarily revolve around communication and proactive attempts to avoid coercion. Men who engage in virtuous communication about sex as the foundation to sexual activity are able to know more about their partners' sexual reality in a way that avoids the epistemic and sexual injustices that result from fake orgasms. I discuss these prescriptions by appealing to virtue epistemology, which identifies the properties excellent knowers possess.

Granting that sexual and epistemic injustices occur when fake orgasms (or otherwise, performative smothering) happens, I outline the structural predilections that cause heterosexual sex to be non-ideal or wrongful. Wrongful sex happens when consent is not obtained or is

obtained coercively, or other relevant harms occur. Non-ideal sex occurs when sex is not wrongful but also not ideal, meaning it does not involve double reciprocal incarnation.

The final portion and goal of the thesis is a direct response to Katherine MacKinnon's "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure Under Patriarchy.'" MacKinnon argues, I believe correctly, that sex under patriarchy is primarily an act of domination and submission (DS) and violence, even when both partners consent to sex.⁷ Under patriarchy, sex is socially constructed such that for women, to be aroused is to be dominated, while men experience domination itself as arousing. Because all sex involves violence insofar as women are subordinated to men as sex objects, by MacKinnon's view, the demarcation of rape and sex by using consent is illusory, and more sex is violent than we think.⁸

Under MacKinnon's view, much of the non-ideal sex we have is in fact wrongful. My discussion of performative smothering supports her conclusion. If a sexual exchange involves performative smothering, which is caused by the kinds of power dynamics MacKinnon discusses, then that sex is in fact harmful to the person experiencing smothering. For epistemic rather than gendered reasons, I agree with MacKinnon's claim that much of our seemingly permissible sex is wrongful.

Despite this initial agreement and compatibility, I disagree with MacKinnon's claim that sex is always wrong just because sex involves DS. MacKinnon's concern is how sex involving submission causes women to be reduced to objects of violence. I argue that DS is not precisely violent against submitters because DS can occur without violence if that DS is exercised in an epistemically virtuous way. I argue that attempts to exercise the virtues that are demanded by the

⁷ Katherine A. MacKinnon. "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy.'" *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 322

⁸ MacKinnon, 322.

imperative to avoid performative smothering can enable DS to happen contemporaneously with double reciprocal incarnation, the predicate of ideal sex. The possibility of this happening is mediated by the presence of virtuous communication during sex: talking to your partner honestly presupposes that your partner is a person, and respect for their sexual testimony renders their body into an extension of their personhood. Such virtuous communication causes double reciprocal incarnation, which involves interacting with a sexual partner as an embodied full person. Insofar as recognized full persons cannot be treated violently as mere sex objects, even if DS is involved in certain sex acts, if double reciprocal incarnation is contemporaneous to the DS, then DS is not wrongful. To the extent that epistemic virtues are employed during sex, MacKinnon is mistaken to equate heteronormative sexuality with violence against women (though she is right to notice the significant co-occurrence of the two). This pairing of epistemic virtues and the existentially constructive qualities of sex in the face of DS is coherent with the lived experiences of some sexual subcultures, especially the BDSM subculture.

My exploration of fake orgasms both confirms MacKinnon's read of sexuality as frequently harmful, but also challenges her conclusion that sex is unavoidably violent to women. Male attempts to anticipate and mitigate the circumstances that elicit fake orgasms represent the kind of vigilance required to ensure that sex is mutually autonomous, pleasurable, honest, and informed. The way this is done in practice involves in part a simple shift in language. Rather than asking if your partner consents to some sex act ("Do you want to have sex?"), which presupposes a course of action that, if MacKinnon is correct, women cannot effectively refuse, ask instead how your partner wants to feel, and how they want to come to feel that way ("What can I do to make you feel best?"). If, in response to this kind of question, both partners mutually

agree that they wish to participate in DS, then a sexual exchange involving DS can be mutually co-created by two (or more) persons. Epistemic virtues like self-knowledge, honesty, and mindfulness improve the actualization of this sort of goal. This critically implies a novel insight: we have sex not only as men or as women, but also as knowers. To the extent the embodied sexual knower knows well, they have better sex.

Myths of Masculinity and Female Pleasure

In this subsection I will give some context and gravity to my discussion by outlining how Greek mythology articulates masculine and feminine sexuality. I then contrast modern views of sexuality and sexual pleasure to more traditional views. I begin by discussing a story of Tiresias.

Tiresias, a mythical Greek sage who foresaw the events of *Oedipus Rex*, was once asked to resolve a debate between Zeus and Hera as to which sex enjoys the most pleasure during intercourse. Tiresias's testimony was recruited because of a magical experience in which Tiresias transformed into a woman for many years before becoming a man once again. Because of this experience, they⁹ has unique knowledge of the sexual pleasures that correspond to having either female or male sexual anatomy. Much to the dismay of Hera, who believed men get the greater share of pleasure during sex, Tiresias told the divine lovers that "if the pleasures of the flesh can be divided into 10 shares, men get only one."^{10 11} As punishment for betraying her in the argument, Hera blinded Tiresias. Zeus, who held the belief that women enjoy sex the most,

⁹ While Tiresias spent most of their life as a male, they have had experiences that make a mere labelling of "he/him/his" inappropriate. When gender is ambiguous, I use "they/them/theirs" as per convention.

¹⁰ The actual matter of whichever kind of body enjoys sex the most is trivial for this paper, but here are some reasons that Tiresias may hold that women enjoy sex most. (a) women are generally capable of multiple orgasms, while men usually are not (b) men consider the penis the sole locus of sexual pleasure, while a much greater amount of the female body is considered erogenous (c) there are a number of very erogenous zones on the male body that are considered taboo to receive pleasure from: nipples, prostate, etc. The prostate is often considered as pleasurable as the clitoris, but is not commonly explored by heterosexual couples.

¹¹ Ovid, and Charles Martin. *Metamorphoses*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005.): 103-104.

gave Tireseas the gift of foresight as a reward for their testimony, thus giving Tireseas their sagely status.

When considered in light of Tireseas's testimony, each divine lover's belief that the other sex gains the most pleasure during intercourse belies a delusion of grandeur on Zeus's part. Believing himself to be a great lover, Zeus insists that women enjoy sex with him more than he enjoys it himself. Hera is convinced otherwise, that Zeus enjoys himself more. If Tireseas's judgement is correct and women ought to enjoy sex more, if Hera is to believe that Zeus reaps the greater pleasures from sex, Zeus must be failing to fulfill her sexuality. Were Hera actually fulfilled, her judgement of whichever partner enjoys sex more would likely cohere with Tireseas's judgement. Knowing Zeus's haughty and lusty character, I imagine this discrepancy emerges from Zeus neglecting his partners' actual experiences. This negligence is plausibly driven by his archetypically masculine confidence. Perhaps to Zeus's mind his headstrong sexuality is a gift to his lover, but for Hera herself, such confidence is a masculine fantasy of sexual prowess that turns out to be, as it were, a bit flaccid.

Without regard to whichever sex most enjoys sexual pleasure, modern heterosexual couples are developing a proactive desire to provide both partners with splendid pleasures. It has become acceptable for consenting adults to indulge in the most pleasurable sex possible given the circumstances of the relationship. This contrasts to historical Western views that sex is primarily reproductive and unionitive in nature.¹² In the Western philosophical and religious tradition, engaging in sex for the sake of pleasure was seen as weakness of the flesh. In this view,

¹² Marietta, "Sexual Morality," 59.

sex ought to be for the creation of children and marriages, not for the release of sexual tension or to indulge in positive pleasure.

Since the feminist-led sexual revolution in the 1960's, this sex-negative perspective on sexuality has been disfavored in lieu of a positive sexuality in which couples can generate solace, pleasure, and spiritual experiences with their bodies and partner(s).¹³ Independently of the many other fruits of sexuality, it is clear that there is a trend towards pursuing greater sexual pleasure per se as evidenced by, for example, couples incorporating sex toys and new sexual techniques into their repertoire.¹⁴ Nonetheless, this movement towards a positive consciousness of sexuality has not occurred as an egalitarian striving for pleasure. It is a project marred by the trappings of any in-situ activity. Being a specifically sexual project, developing a positive and pleasurable sexuality is unavoidably affected by patriarchy.

Accordingly, there is a way in which many men pursuing a pleasurable sexuality with a female partner are like Zeus: he, like Zeus, is likely to overestimate the pleasures he “inflicts” on his partner. One key way this perception develops is via the phenomenon of fake orgasms, which occur when one partner performs the vocal and somatic behaviors that normally accompany an orgasm, despite the fact that one isn't actually happening. Fake orgasm is immortalized in the film *When Harry Met Sally*, when the protagonist Harry¹⁵, boasting about his sexual prowess, is shown the ease with which women can fake an orgasm, thereby inflating the male sexual ego, when the titular character Sally performs a fake orgasm in the middle of a diner. Men like Harry

¹³ Jack Dominian, “Implications of the Sexual Revolution,” *Midwife Health Visit Community Nurse* 18 no. 6 (June 1982): 248-50.

¹⁴ B. J. Rye., and Glenn J. Meaney.. “The Pursuit of Sexual Pleasure.” *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 11 no. 1 (2007): 39.

¹⁵ Harry is the protagonist insofar as masculinist romance narratives prioritize the agentic man meeting the receptive woman, as per this film's title; it is rarely a female protagonist meeting a man.

often hold beliefs about the status of their sexual prowess and their partner's sexual satisfaction that is, to some degree, false, at least in part because of fake orgasms. This is a fact that should be taken seriously when at least 58% of women admit to faking orgasm at least once¹⁶, and a group of female participants admit faking orgasm during, on average, 17.7% of sexual exchanges.¹⁷ 17.7% as a rate of faking orgasm among women is astronomically higher than the 0.01% average reported by men in the same study¹⁸ -- faking orgasm is a decidedly gendered issue. Men, but not women, receive testimony about their sexual skills that misrepresents their actual prowess. In the next section, I highlight the sexual and epistemological relevance of this fact.

Talking Sexy: The Importance of Knowledge & Testimony in the Bedroom

To highlight how fake orgasms and related phenomena are harmful, let us explore a more expositional question. How is it that two individuals with potentially conflicting sexualities can enter into a sexual relationship with each other in a way that is mutually beneficial and reciprocally fulfilling? Ostensibly, no two people have precisely the same sexuality, where sexuality is understood widely: patterns of desire and arousal, sexual interests and preferences, kinks and aversions, degrees of physiological functioning and sexual health, contraceptive preferences, moral beliefs... In the common situation where there is a mismatch in one or more of these domains, how are couples able to find satisfaction and pleasure in each other's bodies? I argue that testimony, often in the form of copulatory vocalizations, is the primary way this is done.

¹⁶ Michael D. Barnett., Idalia V. Maciel, Samuel Van Vleet, and Arthur D. Marsden. "Motivations for Faking Orgasm and Orgasm Consistency among Young Adult Women." *Personality and Individual Differences* 149 (2019): 83.

¹⁷ Miller, 16.

¹⁸ Miller, 16.

I begin by cataloguing kinds of sexual knowledge relevant for engaging in safe and pleasurable sex. I discuss the gravity of communication insofar as sexual knowledge of the self and other is key to making mutually constructive sex happen, especially regarding attempts to have sexual pleasure. Then, because it is relevant to how we know about our own and other sexualities, I discuss sexual script theory, which is a psychological theory on how individuals learn to embody a particular sexuality. I note the conceptual similarities between sexual scripts and Lorraine Code's concept of the social imaginary. I use these similarities to attach some of Code's normative conclusions about the construction of knowledge to how we embody gendered sexual scripts. I conclude that sexual scripts can impair sexual flourishing. Because of how sexual scripts can mismatch in a way that neglects women during sex, communication is basic to sexual flourishing. If communication is important, inability to communicate is harmful. I outline an example of Dotson's testimonial smothering, an epistemic injustice, as it occurs during sex. Smothering during sex is associated with both epistemic and sexual injustices. Finally, I argue for why a novel extension to smothering, performative smothering, is appropriate and necessary to understand some phenomenon that occur during sex.

Sexual Knowledge: Kinds and their Importance

Knowledge is a foundation to sexuality in four important ways. I first outline some areas of sexual knowledge, then place these knowledges in context of Lorraine Code's discussion of the social imaginary, which is the conceptual framework with which we make sense of our social world. Code's discussion reveals how our access to these areas of knowledge is affected by our gendered epistemic position, a fact that is relevant to the epistemic injustices I see happening during sex.

First of the areas of sexual knowledge: to be able to enter into a sexual relationship one must know one's own boundaries, abilities, interests, concerns, desires, etc. Second, beyond the contents of one's own sexuality, one must also know about their lover's sexuality to some extent as well. Third, one should have knowledge of sexual anatomy and physiology as well as the basic repertoire of sex acts. Finally, cultural and health concerns are also important fields of information that enable good sex. One sexual partner at least must have knowledge about how to actualize sex if sexual pleasure and safety are goals in the exchange -- the trope of floundering when two people lose their virginity is founded in epistemology. Since a key element of successful sex is testimony about what to do and how things feel, some sexual knowledge, a precondition to testimony, must be held for sex to be successful. I contend it is often the case that one or both subjects in a sexual exchange has no clue what is going on regarding female pleasure, and especially regarding female pleasure in comparison to male pleasure -- this is harmful. If this is true, good sex becomes difficult to actualize.

One may object by claiming that ignorance can be precisely arousing during sex and that it is a facilitator of good sex. This thinking values exploration and mutual discovery: ignorance about sexuality enables partners to engage in the erotic pleasures of exploring the body and discovering new sensations. I agree with the value of this experience, but not all ignorance leads to pleasurable exploration. Some ignorance is pernicious, a reliably occurring ignorance that is harmful to some group.¹⁹ I contend that among men, especially those who are sexually experienced, most sexual ignorance is pernicious because men's ignorance is not employed to explore the pleasures of the body, causing a harm of neglect regarding sexual pleasure; rather,

¹⁹ Dotson, 238.

male ignorance is given a status-quo kind of acceptance and is not erased in a quest for sexual knowledge.

Knowledge of Sexual Anatomy & Physiology

Consider that it is a long-running joke that men do not understand the clitoris. This is problematic if the clitoris is understood as the anatomical locus of female sexual pleasure. Only a certain percentage of men know about the clitoris's existence and function; fewer yet know how to locate it on a given partner; and fewer still know how and when to appropriately stimulate it. Even fewer still know to ask their partner how they prefer their clitoris to be stimulated, as no two women have precisely identical preferences. Some know how and when to stimulate it, but refuse to do so out of some moral or hygienic disdain for touching female genitals.²⁰ Compare this to the fact that almost all women know precisely what and where the penis is, how to touch it correctly to cause ejaculation, and are willing (or coerced into being willing) to perform oral sex on men. There is a clear disparity regarding how women acquire knowledge about male sexual anatomy and physiology compared to men's knowledge about women. This disparity is harmful to the extent you consider pleasure good: if men are somehow ignorant as to how, or unwilling to, cause orgasms in their partners, then a valuable experience of orgasm is commonly withheld from women.²¹ Knowledge of sexual anatomy is important if sexual pleasure is a good thing.

Knowledge of Sex Acts

Some sexual ignorance can be attributed to gradeschool sex education, in which you are lucky to learn anything at all about having sex, and if you learn, it is about penetration

²⁰ DJ Khaled (a famous musician and cultural icon) recently admitted, quite self-assuredly, to demanding blowjobs while refusing to give cunnilingus for reasons of disgust with female genitals.

²¹ I saw a social media post by a woman with the following question: "How many of you ladies have needed to masturbate after sex with a man just to get off?" Most women responded with a rigorous sense of dissatisfaction and affirmed that this is a frequent reality for women.

exclusively. Neither male nor female pleasure is discussed, as pleasure is seen as ancillary to reproduction insofar as pleasure enables male ejaculation. The clitoris may be taught as a point on some cartoon image of female genitals, but its function is, if mentioned, underemphasized. Nonetheless, poor sex education is not the entire causal explanation of men's ignorance about the clitoris and cunnilingus, because sex ed doesn't teach blowjobs, which almost all women both know how to give, and that they ought to give them. There is a difference regarding how each gender knows the sex acts that are considered pleasurable, especially oral sex. Accordingly, not all of the blame for pernicious sexual ignorance can be placed on sex educators. I perceive a gendered difference in how men and women learn about sexuality in a more informal context. Men's and women's magazines give shape to this intuition: while women's magazines are rife with information on causing men pleasure (see most any cover of *Cosmopolitan*), men's magazines only engage with sexuality to the extent it serves their own desires (i.e., *Playboy*).

Accordingly, there is, I believe, a difference in how each gender knows her or his relation to the other partner's pleasure. Women are expected to provide men with pleasure, using one or more of her body parts. Men, on the other hand, are expected to feel good and ejaculate, and bully for him if he is able to cause her pleasure along the way. When understood in terms of how each gender learns about the various sex acts and how they are encouraged to embody those acts, male sexuality is not in any meaningful way directed at the pleasure of his partner, while female sexuality is rendered, archetypically, as *for* male pleasure. Katherine MacKinnon, as we will see, alludes to this fact: for her, women's sense of the erotic is to be submissively erotic for men. Insofar as men feel no imperative to cause pleasure, they simply remain ignorant as to how to do it, which in turn reinforces the idea that women do not care for or experience pleasure. Recalling

that pleasure begets pleasure, I imagine that any attempt to pleasure his partner will cause men to care more about female pleasure: her enthusiastic returning of the favor will incentivize him to continue learning.

Knowledge of One's Partner's Sexuality

Even if a given person knows about sexual anatomy and the basics of sexual activity, this is not enough knowledge to enable good sex. One must also know the individual preferences of their partner to some greater or lesser extent. This is an area of sexuality where ignorance tends to be least pernicious insofar as learning is mostly a matter of intimacy and mutual discovery over time. This is also a place where the satisfaction of exploration can be garnered by any couple, even the most experienced ones. Because there is so much individual difference in the kinks, touches, positions, situations, and so forth that people can enjoy, I will not discuss this further besides the emphasize that there is no 'one size fits all' sex. Memorizing all the sex acts imaginable and becoming proficient at them while knowing the most fine-grained details of sexual anatomy is not enough. Successful sex is always referent to the pleasures and desires of a given partner; the greatest satisfaction is found when these specific preferences can unfold alongside the other partner's preferences.

Knowledge of One's Own Sexuality

Good sex is also contingent on an individual partner knowing what they themselves enjoy, prefer, dislike, or find uncomfortable or harmful. Consent can only be meaningfully given if an individual knows their own boundaries. Awareness of one's own aversions and setting boundaries around those aversions is both especially important for avoiding harmful or uncomfortable sex. More positively, mutually productive and enjoyable sex requires the ability

to convey information about what an individual wants and how to enact those desires. Compared to someone apathetic and unsure about what sex acts they are enthusiastic about, someone aware of and communicative about their specific preferences enables less confused and more passionate sex.

Knowledge of Sex in Culture and of Sexual Health

Good lovers must also know about the various ways sex takes shape in our culture. Part of that knowledge would include: the themes that define sexuality in our culture, common elements of our sexual scripts and sexual exchanges, and an idea of how our culture considers good and bad sex to look. Things like birth control options, the availability of abortions, and other social ways of controlling the consequences of sex should be known about before engaging in sex. STI recognition, prevention, and treatment is another key area of knowledge. For people interested in finding sexual partners, knowledge of how to get consent, where to find hookups or partners, knowledge of giving and receiving advances, and other related concerns are also relevant areas of knowledge.

Ignorance and Testimony

The reason I discuss these various kinds of sexual knowledge is to highlight how knowledge is fundamental to safety and pleasure in sexual exchanges. However, there are areas of sexual ignorance that are, to varying degrees, pervasive in our sexual lives. When a couple finds themselves struggling to have successful sex, their shared sexual knowledge should become the target of reflection. The couple should inquire as to what kinds of knowledge are missing, and apply appropriate methods of research or communication to remedy those problems. A common example may be that a couple is mismatched in sexual desire and this is

causing problems. Knowledge of the biological, social, behavioral, and relational factors (stress, time, anger at partner, drug use, etc) that impact sexual desire would be key to remedying this couple's issue. Ignorance would bar the couple from mutually building a more satisfying sex life.

The causes of sexual ignorances are multifaceted and non-exhaustively include failings in sex ed, our culture of modesty, shyness and insecurity, and lack of introspection. Accordingly, when seeking to remedy ignorance, the routes to knowledge vary depending on the problem at hand. Ignorance about birth control is solved with research; ignorance regarding one's own sexual preferences is a matter of 'experiential research' and introspection. For the bulk of this thesis, I will focus on ignorances that can be remedied with communication: ignorances that involve lack of mutual knowledge about the other partner's experiences and preferences. Especially pernicious among these ignorances is how to mutually cause female pleasure.

One may object to my focus on knowledge about sexuality by mentioning that this description of sex precludes people with cognitive disabilities from having good sex.²² If someone with a cognitive disability is unable to collect a body of knowledge about sex, my description of sexual knowledge leaves them unable to have successful and pleasurable sex. My response is twofold. For one, much of this knowledge is embodied, physical knowledge: one learns to participate in sex acts much like one learns to ride a bike. It is not clear to me that these kinds of physical learning are impaired in people with most cognitive disabilities. This is supported by the neurological fact that embodied knowledge (muscle memory) is associated with a different part of the brain than semantic knowledge -- the former is associated with the cerebellum, a more basic and presumably less sensitive part of the brain, while the latter is

²² Thanks to Dr. Sarah Vitale for the insightful criticism.

located in the hippocampus, located in a more developed and therefore sensitive part of the brain. Further, communication rather than fact accumulation is the key to successful sex, and many people with cognitive deficits can communicate. Insofar as people with cognitive disabilities can still practice the epistemic virtues of dialogue, open-mindedness, and honesty, they are able to acquire the physical knowledge I place a premium on in this discussion. They can also likely obtain a working knowledge of what works best for their partner -- for example, depending on the extent of the cognitive deficit, they may not know the nuance of birth control, but they may know which method their partner prefers and how to enact that method.

The Pleasure of Communicating

Honest communication and compromise in good faith are basic to developing a flourishing sexual relationship. Communication is a form of testimony, and as will become apparent, how we produce and receive testimony is gendered in important ways. When partners discursively explore the curiosities, preferences, aversions, and mere apathies of both partners, a reciprocally rewarding sexuality can be constructed in the relationship. Since no two people will enter into a relationship with precisely the same idea of a perfect sex life, communication and learning about the other over time is fundamental to a committed sexual relationship.

Accordingly, testimony about the contents of a given lover's sexuality is necessary for a reciprocal sexuality. Testimonial concerns pertain to attaining a mutually fulfilling sexuality.

When testimony about sexual incompatibilities is not heard or spoken, many couples fall into deep, sometimes irreconcilable conflict. For example, sex therapists notice that one of the key causes of conflict in heterosexual couples is a large mismatch of sexual desire. Researchers note that communication about needs and expectations alongside compromise is usually

sufficient to ameliorate these problems.²³ In cases like these, communication is the paramount way to solve problems in the bedroom. A reason communication is foundational in this way, I will argue, is because of a conflict that is embedded into our cultural, gendered views of sexuality.

Traditional heteronormative sexuality, often operationalized in psychology under the theoretical construct “sexual scripts,” favors the male partner. Sexual scripts are the internal models we have of how a sexual exchange should flow. It is the pattern or sequence we envision sex following when we reflect on what sex looks like. Having and enacting a script helps create feelings of naturalness, ease, and flow when engaging in sex. Following a script feels good and rewarding; contradicting a script, on the other hand, creates feelings of awkwardness and confusion. To experience an analogue to what I have in mind, try treating the next cashier you interact with like an old well-regarded friend; the awkwardness and confusion with which they will respond belies how you have trespassed their script for a typical cashiering exchange.

There are meaningful conceptual similarities between the psychologically-branded script theory and Lorraine Code’s epistemological understanding of the social imaginary. Social imaginaries are those sets of symbols, concepts/conceptual relationships, and ontological-metaphysical beliefs that give shape to our view of the world and the actors within it.

²⁴ These imaginaries are ‘social’ because living in a shared social context causes individuals to develop a common imaginary that gives meaning to daily social, political, and personal life.

When we imagine a situation, for example a heterosexual sex act, our vision of it will

²³ William L. Yarber, and Barbara Werner Sayad. *Human Sexuality: Diversity in Contemporary America*. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2016): 241; 243.

²⁴ Lorraine Code. “Self, Subjectivity, and the Instituted Social Imaginary.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, (October 2011): 732.

more-or-less cohere with the contents of the social imaginary, for our social imaginary is the language in which we construct possible realities.

Reading this concept epistemologically in “Self, Subjectivity, and the Instituted Social Imaginary,” Code challenges the traditional belief that persons are metaphysically autonomous actors who act solely from their own volitions, intentions, and desires. Traditionally, Western philosophy has believed that individuals are capable of arbitrarily limitless degrees of self-control, autonomy, and intentionality. These values and capacities are especially afforded value by virtue of their association with the prototypical agent, argues Code. Code notes that because these traits reflect the prototypical *male* actor, we reserve full agency for masculine men, and only men. Our notions of personhood which hinge on pure autonomy and rationality are “discursively constructed in symbols and metaphors that shape and are shaped by historically, culturally dominant ideals of masculinity.” Accordingly, only men are able to know themselves as full persons: women, who are socialized differently from men, cannot know themselves as such. Because our agency is constructed along gender lines, we are in fact not entirely autonomous. This is especially true for female agencies constructed in a patriarchal social imaginary. In our dominant social imaginary, knowledge is masculine, and that which knows and can be known is male. Because the female is not the male, the female is unknown and to some extent, untrue. Since both men and women exist in a conceptual framework that constructs their personhood, they are not autonomous in the way philosophy has long presumed.

Script theory implies a similar criticism of unconditional autonomy as Code: we learn and know how to act and what to do as a consequence of the social context in which we discover how relationships and interactions ought to be performed. What script theory does not discuss

are how gendered differences affect which scripts are taken to be valid. If scripts are similar to the social imaginary, then Code's argument about how agency is a masculine category clearly implies that masculine-typed scripts are taken as truer and more valuable than feminine-typed scripts. In our sexual relationships, we do not act as autonomous people striving for pleasure: we act as men and women who are inextricably bound to a view of sexuality that privileges, as true, male conceptions of pleasure and sex.

Katherine MacKinnon's "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure Under Patriarchy'" follows a similar line of argument. Without committing ourselves to MacKinnon's conclusion that there is no meaningful distinction between rape and sex under patriarchy, MacKinnon insightfully notices how male sexuality is structured around domination. All instances of male arousal, in her view, occur when men have power over a female body. In this respect, sexuality is not aimed towards a mutual flourishing of pleasure and intimacy, but rather at the subservience of female sexuality to men. MacKinnon notes that if arousal and domination are inextricable, consent falsely demarcates between rape and sex: consent is necessary, but not sufficient, to make sex mutual and autonomous.²⁵ Even if MacKinnon is wrong to say all sex under patriarchy is harmful, she is correct to notice how female sexuality is often treated as and reduced to an extension of men's desire, which is to dominate.

Accordingly, heteronormative sexual scripts tend to put a premium on male penetration and orgasm while discounting foreplay, full-body pleasure, and female pleasure in general. Psychologists describe the male sexual script as being a simple sequence of getting turned on,

²⁵ MacKinnon, 322

‘getting in,’ then getting off.²⁶ The male script emphasizes male agency and female passive receptiveness, and tends to be goal-oriented in structure: all sexual acts are indentured to the aim of male orgasm. Female sexual scripts tend to be more experience-oriented, such that arousal and pleasure are valued instead of orgasm per se.²⁷ Female sexual scripts are described as being more cyclical, as a rhythm of arousal, pleasure, and rest, a fact enabled by the ability for the female body to experience multiple orgasms. An obvious tension between these two archetypal scripts is apparent. If men are interested primarily in their (single) orgasm, while women are interested in a pattern of pleasurable experiences, then without efforts to redress differences, one partner is left unfulfilled. Under my interpretation of sexual scripts as being similar to the masculine-favoring social imaginary, this will typically be the female partner. When regarding archetypal sexual scripts, if men insist on penetration and their orgasm, then women may be precluded from receiving the clitoral and bodily stimulation that is more compatible with a fulfilled female sexual script. Critically, it must be noted that even with acknowledgement of hegemonic gender-normative scripts, not all couples embody a traditional heterosexual sexual script.²⁸ Nonetheless, many couples do struggle against these archetypal constraints.

The Wrongs of Smothered Sexuality

In the face of sexual difference or tensions, there is a dynamic quality to sexual encounters where each partner’s desires, pleasures, apathies, and conflicts interact to give shape to the exchange. To be efficacious in shaping the encounter, these feelings must be communicated to one’s partner(s). Therefore, we have a tendency to express pleasure and

²⁶ Tatiana N. Masters, Erin Casey, Elizabeth A. Wells, and Diane M. Morrison. “Sexual Scripts among Young Heterosexually Active Men and Women: Continuity and Change.” *Journal of Sex Research* 50, no. 5 (2013): 409-420.

²⁷ Masters, Wells, & Morrison, 409-420.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 409-420.

aversion through moans, short phrases, certain bodily movements, and our enthusiasm itself.

These methods of communication are called copulatory vocalizations, a name that draws attention to the explicitly sexual form of communication we undergo during sex. While copulatory vocalizations are only sometimes propositions, because these vocalizations contain truth-relevant content about one's sexual experiences, copulatory vocalizations are testimonial.

Copulatory vocalizations are used by partners to constructively guide each other towards the acts and body parts that are most enjoyable in a given moment. However, there are times, especially when there is a mismatch of sexual scripts, that partners fail to communicate their needs in a mutually beneficial way. Fake orgasm is an example, but for the sake of illustration I will first discuss Dotson's concept of testimonial smothering. Then, I will argue for the extension of smothering I have in mind as it applies to such phenomena as fake orgasms.

Testimonial smothering as defined by Dotson are testimonial harms that "occur because the speaker perceives one's immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony."²⁹ She "truncat[es her] own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence."

³⁰ She says only what her audience can hear. Dotson's prototypical example is of a black woman speaking to a white male audience about hard-to-see oppressions like microaggressions. The speaker anticipates that her audience will be unable to register her experiences of microaggressions as valid, as the men do not have the conceptual machinery necessary to make sense of what she is talking about.³¹ To avoid being unheard or even condemned to speaking nonsense, the woman simply does not proffer testimony about her experiences of oppression.

²⁹ Dotson, 244.

³⁰ Dotson, 244.

³¹ Ibid, 246.

I will articulate an example of smothering that is realized during some sexual encounters. Take a heterosexual couple with archetypal heteronormative sexualities as the couple at hand. In this case, the female partner desires some amount of clitoral stimulation. Stimulation of the clitoris is generally necessary for women to experience the most dramatic pleasure and best chance at attaining orgasm.³² However, because of his sexual scripts that prioritize penetration, the male partner is not interested in providing any more clitoral stimulation than is demanded by the need to arouse his partner enough to enable penetration. One of the most ostensibly effective ways the male partner can provide sufficient clitoral stimulation would be through oral sex, but the male partner avoids oral sex, instead providing just enough mutual masturbation to enable penetration.

Taking her tacit acceptance of his activities as enthusiasm, again because of sexual scripts where female acceptance, not enthusiasm, is the goal for him, the male partner begins penis-in-vagina sex until he ejaculates. He thereby ends the sex. The whole time (your imagination can decide how deriding the duration of this “whole time” is) the female partner knows she wants clitoral stimulation, and knows that oral sex would be a good way to get it. However, she chooses not to share knowledge of her own experiences and desires because she anticipates that her partner will not hear this testimony. She anticipates that he will insist that vaginal sex is enough -- after all, Freud held that only vaginal orgasms are developmentally ‘mature’ -- and that she is somehow wrong for wanting more stimulation. Were he asked to do something else, he may be wrongly offended by the implication -- which he fabricates -- that he

³² For a more thorough explanation of this fact, see Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018.

is not skilled. He is able to get away with leaving her unsatisfied by virtue of the power and agency sexual scripts afford to men.

Because the female partner in this example has knowledge about her experiences and what she desires, but truncates the content of her testimony in the face of testimonial incompetencies on the male partner's part, she smothers herself as per Dotson. She avoids engaging in copulatory vocalizations that would constructively direct the sexual exchange in her favor. Insofar as testimonial smothering is a form of violence against someone in their capacities as a knower, if cases like this occur, then it is a cause for concern, regardless of how important you might regard sexual pleasure. If you see sexual pleasure as a good itself, there is a clear dual-edged injustice here regarding both epistemic and sexual goods.

It must be kept in mind that the ability to communicate well would have solved the issue at hand for this couple. If the male partner had the insight to notice dissatisfaction and inquired about it, or had created emotional space for his partner to provide testimony about her experiences, then neither partner would have experienced injustice nor dissatisfaction. For the male partner, preventing this injustice is as simple as honestly making it clear to his partner that feedback is desired, while following up on feedback with actions. In this case, it means asking "What can I do for you," hearing her desire for oral sex, and doing it.³³ Acquiescing to the female partner's desires does not shift the injustices to the male partner because no example of smothering emerges from honest dialogue, and presumably, the partners can still engage in penetration after oral sex as they prefer, probably with comparatively more enthusiasm -- recall that many women are capable of multiple orgasms.

³³ Or doing an analogous activity that does not violate his sexual boundaries should oral sex be something he does not consent to. I.e., using a vibrator or manual stimulation; pleasuring her body while she masturbates.

Straightforward solutions like these not being enacted in practice demands a curious eye. If it requires no great insight to prevent smothering and engage in more constructive sexual practices, why don't men do it? In brief, I argue that there are two components to what prevents men from facilitating sexual communication with their partner. On one hand, men are concerned with the appearance or performance of sexual pleasure from their partner, while on the other hand, men are able to tacitly demand this performance insofar as female pleasure has been, in the language of Marilyn Frye, enslaved to male interests. The word 'enslavement' as used here refers to how female sexuality is subverted and warped to serve male, rather than female, sexual interests.³⁴ I will expand on this argument in the next section. I will conclude that smothering oneself while being expected to provide a performance that contradicts your truth causes such phenomena as fake orgasms to occur.

Seeing fake orgasms as performances that adhere to an instance of being smothered warrants an extension of Dotson's smothering. I call this novel concept performative smothering. Performative smothering occurs if and only if a knower is unable to share knowledge they possess because the hearer is unable to hear the truth, while nonetheless operating under the hearer's expectation that the knower provide testimony that runs against the knower's actual knowledge. Because the knower's truth must be hidden while nonetheless under demands to provide a specific sort of testimony (a bodily performance of orgasm), the knower performs as if they actually hold the knowledge expected by the hearer. Insofar as the knower acquiesces to these expectations in her embodied and spoken testimony, they engage in performative smothering.

³⁴ Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983): 61.

Fake Orgasms as Performative Smothering

The Etiology of Fake Orgasms

In this section, I argue for why I conceptualize fake orgasms as an instance of performative smothering. Since the performance that happens when a woman fakes orgasm contradicts her lived experience of not having an orgasm, then women engage in performative smothering when they fake orgasms. I argue there exist significant epistemic injustices that occur whenever a woman fakes orgasms which are least as bad as the injustices associated with mere smothering. Dotson describes the injustice of smothering as having to do with a knower being caused to question their ability to hold knowledge about their own experiences. The inability for others to take their knowledge seriously causes self-doubt in the knower, which means that the knower is harmed in her capacity as a knower. Performative smothering may be even worse because the injustice involves not only self-doubt, but also an acquiescence to a false image desired by the audience. I conclude this section discussing how men especially can avoid causing fake orgasms.

Psychologists have found that generally speaking, men prioritize female orgasm more than women do themselves.³⁵ This fact harkens in part to the aforementioned difference in sexual scripts between men and women. While female orgasm is almost always a boon to a female's sexual experience, the locus of pleasure for the female sexual script tends to be intimacy, full-body pleasure, and feelings of arousal. According to these archetypal scripts, orgasm is not necessary for most women to feel as though they have had a complete sexual experience, although it is rarely undesirable.

³⁵ Barnett, Maciel, & Marsden, 86.

Conversely, men place the locus of pleasure on orgasm and penetration. Sex without (male) orgasm is not sex.³⁶ Accordingly, there are at least two reasons that men demand orgasms out of their female partners. One is that men simply project their own sexuality onto women. In the absence of clear communication about what is desired out of a given sexual encounter, an attempt to identify with the partner's experience will involve placing one's own desires into the body of the other partner. Since men need orgasm to have a complete sexual encounter, in the male partner's implicit understanding of the female body, women must feel that way too. This is another reason communication is a key to successful sexual encounters: merely understanding that orgasm isn't the *telos* of all sex for women changes the male perspective on sexual interactions to be more about arousal and intimacy, and less about orgasm itself.

The second reason has to do with how masculine identity is constructed, to some extent, around sexual prowess. A man is manly in proportion to his ability to, as it is often said, fuck his partner senseless. This expectation is in tension with his expectation that attaining his orgasm causes penetration, and thereby sex, to be over. Because men want to penetrate and ejaculate while also wishing to witness his partner cum in response to that penetration, the male demands that his partner will come before he does.

The fact of the matter, however, is that women experience orgasm with less consistency than men.³⁷ This fact is caused, I imagine, by many things, not least among them the tendency for the archetypal female sexual script to care less about orgasm. I should also note that it may have to do with legitimate biological and psychological differences that make orgasm harder for

³⁶ Frye, "To Be and Be Seen: The Politics of Reality," 157

³⁷ Barnett, Macie, & Marsden, 83.

women to attain. I will abstain from speaking to biological influences; as MacKinnon notes, our biological sex responses are heavily conditioned by the social world.³⁸

Of course, sometimes orgasms simply don't happen for no pernicious reason, or even because of enjoyable reasons. Some people enjoy the practice of orgasm denial, which intentionally brings people near to orgasm without actually having one. The intent is to generate high levels of arousal and desire that persist between sexual encounters. Other times, orgasms don't happen merely because of some intervening physiological factor like stress or a lack of energy. Alternatively, difficulty having orgasms may simply be a product of amateurish or mutually unfamiliar sex. Not all orgasm-less instances of sex are problematic: only those instances which are caused by men's lack of knowledge or care, or by women's experiences of things like spectating are particularly pernicious.

One concept in sex therapy, spectating, may explain a psychological cause for this disparity. Spectating occurs when someone having sex cognitively observes themselves having sex rather than simply being "in the moment." Spectating is problematic because it emerges from sexual anxieties and causes lower sexual satisfaction -- people who spectate themselves report fewer orgasms, less satisfaction, and less immersion in a sexual experience.³⁹ Spectating is more common among women because of, I argue, the relatively greater demands placed on women during sex. Not only must they competently provide the man with pleasure, they must also receive immense pleasure from him. These expectations cause women to self-evaluate their sexual experiences and performances in a way that men are not expected to do. If spectating is wrongful insofar as it causes less sexual satisfaction and spectating is caused in part by male

³⁸ MacKinnon, 319.

³⁹ Yarber & Sayad, 454.

demands on female sexuality, then men should intentionally not place such demands on their partner.

Even if spectating, differences in scripts, or biological differences explains some amount of the disparity in orgasm consistency between men and women, I believe epistemological concerns regarding sexual pleasure are more relevant. Compared to women's knowledge of how to cause male orgasms, as I have argued, men have significantly less knowledge of female sexual responses and the female orgasm. The vast majority of women know precisely what ejaculation looks like and how to cause it to happen; conversely, physiological indicators of female orgasm are so poorly known that few men can reliably discern between fake and authentic orgasms. Further, knowledge of the clitoris and how to stimulate it appropriately is significantly less pervasive than knowledge of the penis and how to stimulate it. While *Cosmopolitan* puts promises of blowjob tips and tricks on its cover, I've for one never seen a men's magazine advertise itself with analogous information about cunnilingus. The differences in how sexual knowledge is distributed in a way that emphasizes teaching women how to give men pleasure has to do with how our conception of sexuality prioritizes male pleasure over that of women.

Further, when men believe themselves to have an understanding of female orgasms, they are frequently mistaken. This is predicated on porn, in which female orgasm is falsely portrayed as a series of writhings, moans, screams, and ecstasies. More realistically, female orgasm, while sometimes genuinely causing such responses, is a physiological response that occurs primarily in the vulva. Pulsing of the pelvic floor, retraction of the clitoris, and increased production of lubricant are more fundamental (though not necessary) markers of female orgasm, analogous to

the ejaculatory pelvic floor twitches that accompany male orgasm. This harder-to-film response is not portrayable in porn, so men acquire a false, performative understanding of female orgasm suitable for porn. Therefore, men are ignorant, to some extent, both of how to cause female pleasure and orgasm, and how to identify genuine orgasms when they happen.

Because men desire female orgasms -- as a marker of his prowess and a projection of his own sexuality; not for her sake -- men place pressure on women to enjoy the sexual encounter. This pressure may be explicit ("come for me!") or implicit. Because, ostensibly, the female partner is concerned about the well-being and interests of her partner, in part due to her gendered role as a caregiver, she will take this pressure seriously as she undergoes sexual acts. I imagine that women experience this pressure as a burden, at least insofar as it encourages spectating. The female partner will ask herself "am I liking this in the right way, and in the right amount?" The female partner especially knows that the male will be upset if she does not feel pleasure of the extent and kind he expects.

Since women do not experience sexual pleasure and especially orgasm to the same extent as men, often due to pernicious causes, there is a tension in the archetypal female sexual experience. On one hand, she knows that her partner demands her pleasure. On the other, she may not be actually experiencing pleasure or orgasm of the kind expected of her. Such an experience causes anxiety and is likely a key cause of spectating. Insofar as her experiences mismatch the demands placed on her -- she is not likely to cum, but she is demanded to do so -- the woman is met with a challenging situation that can be resolved in one of two salient ways. One way is to simply communicate. In the absence of power imbalances, the woman can make

her desires clear and expect them to be fulfilled. However, because of the power differences that men and women inherit from patriarchy, the more actionable solution is to fake orgasm.

The final thread of this analysis is how men have more power during sex than women. MacKinnon gracefully describes this fact: male sexuality *is* domination, and female sexuality *is* submission.⁴⁰ Insofar as a heterosexual couple embodies this kind of sexuality, women simply do not have the agency to raise an issue with their partner. As MacKinnon holds, to be dominated is to be aroused for women; standing up for oneself truncates the domination and thus truncates arousal. In this way, the woman's communication about the quality of the sexual experience is smothered: she knows that the male partner can only hear affirmation of his sexual prowess, and any attempts to improve her stimulation or pleasure would be met with frustration or simple dismissal.

One may object here that the lack of communication from the female partner is more a product of kindness than it is an example of smothering. She simply wants to let him have a good time, and chooses not to create a fuss. I respond that in a mutual sexual exchange, the very essence of "a good time" should be the exchange of pleasure, not the self-gratification of fucking a body for yourself. In a mutualistic sexuality, there is no tension between male and female sexual pleasure because pleasure of one ought to unfold from the pleasure of the other. In this way, the female partner proffering testimony about how to cause more pleasure would be the kind thing to do. Her attempts to ask for this-or-that stimulation should be heard with gusto, not frustration. Further, the key point is that the male partner cannot meet the woman's dependencies, the term used by Dotson to describe the cognitive machinery required to make

⁴⁰ MacKinnon, 328.

sense of someone's testimony. When dependencies are anticipated to be unmet by the speaker, smothering occurs. The male partner cannot meet her dependencies because in prototypical sexuality, he is unable to conceive of sex as a mutualistic exchange; it is a matter of his pleasure, not the couple's pleasure.

Along these lines, if the foregoing analysis is correct, then the faking of female orgasms not only represents smothering, but also a performance of pleasure that coheres to the male partner's expectations. She not only refuses to share her embodied truth of insufficient pleasure, but also proactively provides testimony that coheres with the male image of the sexual exchange. She puts on a performance that embodies what he wants to see from her.

Fake Orgasms and the Morality of Sexuality

Accordingly, women who fake orgasms most frequently do so for reasons of 'altruistic deceit,' to gratify the partner's ego despite his various shortcomings.⁴¹ I believe two morally-relevant harms emerge from this performance. On one hand, she suffers epistemic injustices as a consequence of engaging in performative smothering. On the other hand, she suffers from a sexual injustice in having her erotic experience interrupted by the need to tell a lie.

Smothering is, definitionally, an example of epistemic injustice, which are instances of harm against a knower in their capabilities of a knower. Smothering harms knowers because it causes knowers to question their ability to form rational beliefs about the world. The knower, anticipating that her hearers will be unable to make sense of what she has knowledge of, begins to question her own experiences and way of knowing. Being able to produce and share knowledge about one's own experiences are key components of a person's epistemic agency: to

⁴¹ Cooper, 428.

have this ability neglected is a wrong. In sexual instances of smothering, she may wonder if women ought to feel much pleasure at all, for instance. A continual perception of the inability to talk about her lack of pleasure may cause a lack of pleasure to be accepted as the status quo. Anecdotally, some women believe that sexual pleasure is a man's experience, and women just put up with sex for him. This belief may emerge at least in part because their experiences of desire for pleasure have been continually smothered by our social views of women's sexuality, as well as by particular men with whom she has had sex. Women with the belief that sexual pleasure is not for them have experienced epistemic violence generated by sexual scripts because they've been coerced into not possessing the knowledge that sex ought to be fun for everyone involved.

This epistemic harm may be even worse in cases of performative smothering compared to smothering itself. Performative smothering involves not only failing to share your truth, but also proactively reinforcing the status quo as the audience desires to have it. In the case of fake orgasms, the knower is not only harmed in her capacity to know her own sexual experience when she fakes, but she also provides testimony that explicitly encourages a reproduction of the unfruitful sexual experience. Her partner, thinking himself to be a great lover, will engage in the same sexual techniques that made her "cum" last time. By faking orgasm once, she may be harmed as a knower insofar as her knowledge is subverted and inverted to create a situation that runs directly against her needs. She is left in a shadow of doubt ("Does sex even feel good?") and an outlook of unfulfilling sex, insofar as he learns she 'likes' whatever made her 'cum' last time. Performative smothering has a dual-layered epistemic harm: one that harms the knower as

a person capable of self-knowledge, and one that harms the knower as a person capable of using knowledge to restructure her reality.

Since I take sexual pleasure seriously as a locus of intimacy, enjoyment, and self-discovery, fake orgasms also cause significant sexual injustices. Faking an orgasm implies that a real orgasm is not going to happen. While sex without orgasm is entirely acceptable and sometimes desirable, in most instances, people want to have orgasms. Being cornered into choosing to fake an orgasm, rather than discussing her needs or even simply ending the sex, does damage to the erotic and pleasurable quality of the sex. Faking an orgasm implies some amount of time spectating, something I previously discussed as harmful. Time spent spectating (“Am I going to cum? Should I ask for something else? Does this feel good? Should I just fake it?”) is time not relishing the sex, so in the leadup to the fake orgasm, the woman is not enjoying whatever pleasure she may have had available to her. The fake orgasm itself probably isn’t pleasurable, and afterwards, a majority of men will be done having sex with her. Not only is she distracted from the actual sexual experience, but she finds herself with some emotional baggage about feeling like she needed to lie, and that she couldn’t be honest with her partner. This harms the ability for sex to foster intimacy. I imagine the general quality of the sex cannot be bolstered by faking orgasm in most instances. If sexual quality is a good, then things that unjustifiably harm it are unjust. Since fake orgasms harm sexual quality for bad reasons, fake orgasms also involve sexual injustices.

These twin epistemic and sexual injustices makes sex that involves fake orgasms morally worse -- it falls in the ethical category of wrongful sex. The presence of these harms implies that sex that would be permissible is actually harmful. Non-ideal sex, permissible but not *prima facie*

wrongful sex, involving fake orgasms ends up being wrongful. I argue that ideal sex, sex which involves double reciprocal incarnation, will not feature fake orgasms. The reason for this is that double reciprocal incarnation involves interacting with your partner as an embodied person: this modality of interaction indicates that honest communication is a fundamental feature of the sex. If you are having sex with a embodied person, that person will feel empowered to communicate about their embodied experiences; conversely, if you are having sex with a body to which you do not ascribe agency, you preclude the person from enacting her epistemic power of testimony to improve sex for her. Fake orgasms only happen during non-ideal sex, but the presence of fake orgasms pushes that sex into the wrongful category because of the harms incurred on the performer of the fake orgasm.

There are many morally-relevant reasons to avoid fake orgasms. If my etiology of fake orgasms is correct, then men hold the lion's share of the responsibility for causing fake orgasms. What should be done, and by whom, to rectify the injustices at hand here?

Turning Performance into Reality

In this section, I argue that to avoid the harms inflicted on women by men during sex, men are responsible for changing, to some degree, the way they communicate with women during sex. The goal of these changes is to encourage collaboration and mutuality, while discouraging presumptiveness, epistemic violence, and unjustified control. I discuss how developing and exercising epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness, honesty, and openness to dialogue are the way men can change in this way. In short, I recommend shifting conversations about sex from a yes/no model of agreeing on particular sex acts to a mutually creative and dialogical way of uncovering desires and satisfactory sex acts. This way of communicating

invites testimony, pleasure, and intimacy, and in turn is conducive to double reciprocal incarnation, the predicate of ideal sex.

The various harms I have identified when fake orgasms and other forms of epistemic violence happen during sex are generally caused by men and male sexuality. To the extent that men exercise power over women to garner their own pleasure and enjoyment to the detriment to the women's pleasure and enjoyment, men engage in wrongful sexual practices. These practices are, as I have argued, often located in various kinds of ignorance caused by structural ignorances as well as personal epistemic failings. While it is true that men are raised in a gendered way to have a sexuality that inflicts these harms and thus men may have mitigated blame regarding these harms, it is also true that men are capable of taking responsibility for their own epistemic practices. I have thoroughly demonstrated why communication and the sharing of testimony is a key way that successful and pleasurable sexual exchanges are created: this same avenue will be where I focus my prescriptions for men becoming morally and epistemologically just lovers -- and better ones, too. I will argue the route to this improvement is centered on collaborative communication.

What I mean by collaborative communication is communication that puts a premium on the epistemic virtues of open-mindedness, honesty with interlocutors and with oneself in the belief-forming process, and the use of dialogue.⁴² Epistemic virtues are desirable character traits that apply to individuals in their capacities as knowers. Things like open-mindedness and reliance on dialogue are epistemic virtues because the possession of these traits helps agents

⁴² James Montmarquet. "An 'Internalist' Conception of Epistemic Virtue." In *Knowledge, Belief, and Character*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (2000): 137-138

acquire knowledge about their partners that is responsive to the testimony and experiences of the partner.

If sexual exchanges are created from a place of dialogue and honest testimony, rather than assertion and control, then men create much more emotional and creative space for women to collaborate on the direction and shape of a sexual exchange because from the beginning of a sexual conversation or exchange, such men make an effort to emphasize the mutual, co-equal quality of good sexual encounters. Men who prioritize dialogue by asking their partners what they want to feel and how they want to interact create an emotionally intimate environment in which partners feel in control of their own testimony and their part in the sexual exchange. Paired with open-mindedness and thus a charitable reception of any proffered testimony, men who invite their lovers to speak honestly about their desires end up being more just than men who uncooperatively assert their own sexuality.

Epistemically virtuous communication during sex prevents epistemic violence, i.e. fake orgasms, to the extent that men who are virtuous eliminate the aforementioned preconditions to things like fake orgasms. Fake orgasms are caused, as per my earlier discussion, by a difference in power between men and women, and by men's tacit pressure on women to experience sexual pleasure without actually communicating as to how to cause that pleasure. These conditions are mitigated insofar as dialogical construction of a sexual exchange seeks to create a better balance of power regarding who can control the shape and direction of the sexual exchange. Even if the sexual exchange itself involves power differences (i.e., sex acts involving the consensual use of dominance and submission), there is an equality between partners regarding the power to determine the contents of the sexual exchange. Also, men who are open-minded and honest no

longer tacitly demand female pleasure: rather, they invite the specific desires of their partner, and act to realize those desires, avoiding unjustified demands on the female's experience of pleasure. This course of action and discussion is very likely to cause women real pleasure, precluding the need for performative smothering anyways.

I anticipate someone reading my prescriptions as saying that epistemic virtue is itself sexy and arousing for partners. This is not my claim, although I can easily imagine people who are aroused by caring sexual communication. In general, I imagine these conversations I recommend are frequently awkward, embarrassing, revealing, and a little nerve-wracking. Revealing your deepest desires and discussing specific sex acts can be a matter of shame and embarrassment for many people. Accordingly, this course of action might not necessarily be sexy in itself. My intent with these prescriptions is to enable an emotional and epistemic relationship between lovers that allows sex to be morally and sexually better by avoiding epistemic violence and ignorance, promoting the actual satisfaction of erotic and intimate desires.

With practice, this way of talking may be done in a sexier way over time: it may sound less like an awkward conversation, and more like conversational foreplay. With practice, these virtues and how they manifest as action will become more refined. I'll take an example of obtaining consent to certain sex acts as an example of how I envision a successful use of these virtues. Typically, men *get* (note italics) consent by asking "Do you want to have sex?" The man may or may not ask about specific sex acts, like oral sex or penetration. This way of asking is problematic because it puts women, who are on the downside of testimonial and actual power, in a position of having two options: say yes, or say no. Saying no may be problematic as it is difficult to refuse the implicit demands of someone in power and may invite retaliation; saying

yes may be problematic if she is not interested in sex, or is only consenting to avoid the consequences of saying no.⁴³ To avoid creating this double bind, men should *invite* consent in a dialogical way instead. He should ask, with an inviting kind of body comportment, “Would you like to do anything with me? Is there any way I can help you feel that you’d enjoy?” This way of asking, while certainly not radically free of the implications of power, invites dialogue and the discussion of specific sex acts. The hearer is invited to say “I don’t want anything right now [or ever],” or to jump into an explanation of her desires and preferences.

To the extent that consent is mutually created and a general course of action is dialogically determined between partners regarding an upcoming round of sex, I surmise that those individuals would frequently have ideal sex. Recall that ideal sex is predicated on the presence of double reciprocal incarnation, the interaction of bodies-as-persons; when a touch or feeling of pleasure is seen as an extension of the personhood of the partner. I argue that virtuous epistemic practices encourage double reciprocal incarnation because virtuous epistemic practices are predicated on the conscious recognition of the value of interlocutors as persons and knowers. I cannot engage in fruitful dialogue without proactively recognizing my interlocutor and their experiences as valuable and meaningful. To the extent that a sexual exchange is mutually created against this background of mutual recognition, embodying that sexual exchange involves recognizing your partner and their body as having agency and personhood. This conclusion leads to my final argument, which is a criticism of MacKinnon’s condemnation of sex in patriarchy.

Lovers as Knowers: A Critique of MacKinnon

⁴³ That is, she may only say yes because she has been taught through various social mechanisms to be submissive to the advances of men. The following section will discuss this in more detail.

I have identified ways in which being a virtuous knower is relevant to having ideal sex. There is an obvious implication of this fact: one's status as a knower is morally and sexually relevant to their capacities as a lover. When taken to its logical end, this insight runs against Katherine MacKinnon's claim that sex in patriarchy is unilaterally wrongful, and that consent is an illusory way of drawing the boundaries between rape and sex. In this section, I begin by doing an argument recreation of MacKinnon's argument in "Sex, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy.'" I emphasize my agreement with her argument in general, especially her persuasive argument that sexual arousal in patriarchy is attached to acts of dominance and submission which is violent against women and deprives them of human agency. Nonetheless, I believe MacKinnon relies on a conceptual error: she discusses sexuality only in our capacities as men and women, and neglects other categories along which we as individuals have sex. Accordingly, I apply my foregoing conclusion that lovers have sex as knowers as a critique to MacKinnon's conclusion. The fact that the moral qualities of sex is relevant to the epistemic capacities of the lovers on hand is both coherent with and oppositional to MacKinnon's conclusion. On one hand, my discussion of fake orgasms confirms MacKinnon's conclusion that seemingly permissible sex is often actually harmful or wrongful. On the other hand, it is possible to have sex as a virtuous knower, a character trait that encourages a form of sexual embodiment that runs against MacKinnon's concerns. I conclude that to the extent lovers employ epistemic virtues to encourage double reciprocal incarnation in a given exchange, even if that sexual exchange involves sex acts that employ dominance and submission, that sex is not violent to women in the way MacKinnon is concerned about.

MacKinnon's Argument

“Sex, Pornography, and Method: ‘Pleasure under Patriarchy’” provides a scathing critique against sex in patriarchy. MacKinnon’s conclusion is surmised in the following quote: “When a woman accepts what would be a rape if she did not accept it, what happens is sex,”⁴⁴ She arrives at this conclusion by persuasively arguing that masculine and feminine sexuality are constructed to be, respectively, dominating and submissive. She discusses how our views of how we experience sexuality and sexual desire are predicated on essentialist, Freudian notions of innate sexual drives in which men unrelentingly need sexual satisfaction, and have biological justification to wrest sex from women.⁴⁵ MacKinnon insightfully notices the constructedness of this view. The Freudian notion of an innate, biological source of sexual aggression must be constructed, MacKinnon notes, because most sex men pursue is not intended to satisfy the principle biological goal of sex, reproduction.⁴⁶ Refuting an essentialist view of sexuality as involving male dominance, MacKinnon instead points to how sexuality is constructed by culture. She especially attends to how pornography models what men find arousing. To the extent that most pornography “constructs women as things for sexual use and constructs its consumers to desperately want women to desperately want possession and cruelty and dehumanization,”⁴⁷ pornography is part of the patriarchal system that constructs sexuality as a matter of dehumanizing hierarchy. In summary, “male sexual desire is thereby simultaneously created and serviced, never satisfied once and for all, while male force is romanticized, even sacralized,

⁴⁴ MacKinnon, 322

⁴⁵ Ibid, 319

⁴⁶ Ibid, 321

⁴⁷ Ibid, 327

potentiated, and naturalized, by being submerged into sex itself.”⁴⁸ As such, sexual exchanges are predicated on the male application of sexual or physical force against women.⁴⁹

To the degree male sexual force is exerted, the more arousing men and women experience the sex to be. In MacKinnon’s view, for women to engage in sex, they must be conditioned to see restraint and submission as arousing: MacKinnon claims that women who have experienced sexual force “feel betrayed by their bodies and seek mental justifications... that they really wanted the [sexual violence] or interpret the violation as their own sexuality.”⁵⁰ Their “[sexual characteristics] are created out of social conditions of oppression and exclusion... This is why interpreting female sexuality as an expression of women's agency and autonomy is [wrong].”⁵¹

MacKinnon’s powerful conclusion is to take her rendering of male and female sexuality in tandem, concluding that because sex in patriarchy is predicated on the exertion of force and violence against women, consent is not sufficient to make sex permissible. The only difference, in MacKinnon’s view, between rape and sex is that women allow sex (but not rape) to happen, and that permission is sourced from an internalized self-objectification of her own body and sexuality. From men’s perspective, there is a negligible difference in how one enacts physical force on their partner: both rape and sex involve male dominance. It is worth mentioning that MacKinnon’s argument extends to cover non-heteronormative sexuality, including dominatrixes and homosexuality. She claims the former is a mere reversal of the themes she describes, while the latter is an inversion.⁵² MacKinnon concludes that “Rape and intercourse are not

⁴⁸ Ibid, 325

⁴⁹ Ibid, 332

⁵⁰ Ibid, 339

⁵¹ Ibid, 341

⁵² Ibid, 332

authoritatively separated by any difference between the physical acts or amount of force involved but only legally...”⁵³ While some instances of permissible sex do occur in MacKinnon’s view and consent is necessary but not sufficient for permissible sex, the vast majority of consensual sex is actually wrong.⁵⁴

Lovers as Knowers

Despite being reticent to agree that consensual sex is often wrongfu, I have trouble rejecting MacKinnon’s conclusion. Her argument appears sound to me. In fact, I believe her conclusion that much of the seemingly permissible sex is in fact wrongful can be supported with different reasons than the structure of sexuality and pornography in patriarchy. There are also epistemic reasons to come to this same conclusion. The portion of this thesis that discusses the wrongs of fake orgasms are the reasons that lead to this cohesion. MacKinnon claims that consensual sex is usually wrongful because consent does not wave away the sexual violence that men impose on women. I claim that seemingly permissible sex is wrongful to the extent that epistemic harms associated with fake orgasms and other forms of performative smothering are present during the exchange. Since fake orgasms are common,⁵⁵ this indicates cohesion with MacKinnon: much of our sex is wrong. Critically, in MacKinnon’s argument, the insufficiency of consent pivots around gender relations. In my argument, the insufficiency of consent pivots around epistemic relations. I provide a way to ameliorate the insufficiency of consent along epistemic lines by pointing to ways men can avoid the epistemic harms that can occur during otherwise consensual sex; MacKinnon does not provide a meaningful way to move past the harms of patriarchy on our sexualities.

⁵³ Ibid, 340

⁵⁴ Ibid, 344

⁵⁵ Cooper, 423

I wish to provide a way permissible sex can occur despite MacKinnon's correct concerns by drawing attention to how even if our gender relations are fundamentally located in internalized structures of domination and submission that cause sexual harm to women, our relations to each other as lovers and partners are not fully defined by our gender relations: they are also defined by our epistemic, among other, relations. There are ways we can participate in sexual relationships that are premised on non-gendered relations. I attend especially to the importance of virtuous epistemic practices that, in tandem with consent, are sufficient to enable permissible sex.

I believe MacKinnon is correct that most heterosexual sexual exchanges in patriarchy are going to be premised on the exchange of power, generally taking the form of male dominance and female submission. I perceive MacKinnon's concern to be that dominating sex acts cause men to experience female sexuality as "want[ing for] possession, cruelty, and dehumanization." I criticize her by claiming that even if men and women engage in sex that involves sex acts of dominance and submission, these sex acts can happen against an epistemic background of co-equality, mutual creation, and mutual pleasure that arises from the use of dialogue in the development of a sexual exchange.

It is critical that co-equal and thus permissible sex can nonetheless involve sex acts that employ domination and submission. This is because the sex our sexualities experience as arousing must involve domination and submission, if MacKinnon is correct. Because co-equality, garnered from virtuous dialogue, is antithetical to "possession, cruelty, and dehumanization,"⁵⁶ sex involving co-equality is permissible, even if the physical sex acts being

⁵⁶ MacKinnon, 327

employed appear to involve these immoral qualities. One can permissibly have the kinds of sex that are arousing to a sexuality conditioned to find dominance and submission arousing if acts of dominance and submission are only enacted against an epistemic background of mutual recognition and co-equality.

I should be clear that when I picture morally perfect sex, no acts of dominance or submission are employed. There are legitimate reasons to be concerned about an individual's sexuality being expressed in its most full form when they are tied up and spanked. It implies a feeling of security in bondage at least, something that I am reticent to find acceptable. My argument here is not that dominance and submission is praiseworthy when epistemic virtue is employed. My argument is that dominance and submission, which is the kind of sex we are conditioned to find arousing, can be permissible when enacted for reasons that flow from the practice of epistemic virtue with a sexual partner. I intend to preserve our moral ability to have sex, even kinky sex, as we identify it in our current predicament, not to say that the specific way we envision 'kinky sex' is praiseworthy.

Sexual exchanges that employ virtuous communication as I prescribe earlier are permissible because they are conducive to ideal sex, i.e. sex involving double reciprocal incarnation. This is because mutual dialogue that recognizes the experiences and testimony of your partner presupposes their personhood, and the fruits of that recognition in turn becomes an embodied sexual exchange. Each partner's testimony is incarnated by themselves and their partner over the course of the sexual encounter. In concrete terms, testimony involving a desire to receive oral sex is in turn embodied by the partner when the epistemic virtues of open-mindedness and honesty are employed: one partner's personhood is transformed, through

testimony, into a sexual act performed by the other partner. This is true even if the desires being communicated involve acts of dominance and submission, like bondage or spanking. I defend the notion that this kind of mutual testimonial recognition and incarnation is mutually exclusive with the dehumanizing harms MacKinnon is concerned about: you cannot objectify a body you are interacting with as the incarnation of a recognized, autonomous person.

Here is the rub: insofar as dominance and submission is actually and perhaps exclusively arousing in patriarchy, the kinds of sex people want to have will involve acts of dominance and submission. These acts often have the appearance of violence. However, I conclude that insofar as the decision to involve acts of dominance and submission in a sex act is agreed upon in the epistemically virtuous and consensual manner I have described, these acts do not constitute violence, but rather mutuality and co-equality. The acts will be engaged in with immediate respect to the actual personhood of the submitter and dominator. The harms of objectification, reduction, and dehumanization that are associated with non-virtuous acts of domination and submission are instead replaced with a mutually constructive and perhaps liberatory way of interacting.

To the extent a lover can proffer testimony about their deepest and most intimate desires, have that testimony uptaken, then have those desires caringly and passionately enacted, even if the content of those desires is to be tied up, spanked, or otherwise dominated, one must imagine that the physical experience of force is accompanied with an emotional and existential feeling of care and intimacy. Knowing well causes lovers to love each other well, even when engaging in sex acts associated with dominance and submission.

I anticipate an objection along the lines of Code's argument that the gender of a knower is epistemologically significant.⁵⁷ Focusing on our individual capacities as knowers to solve gendered harms associated with patriarchal sexuality just shifts the problem from gender per se, to how gendered knowing impacts our ability to produce sexual testimony and dialogue. Since knowers are gendered, the ability for men and women to dialogue to create mutual sexual exchanges is impaired by both their gender, and their gendered status as knowers. This is because male knowers are typically afforded greater credibility and epistemic power than female knowers. At a glance, I acknowledge that this objection could very well be relevant in sexual dialogues between couples. In fact, much of structural predilections that elicit fake orgasms cohere with this objection, as I have discussed: because men are afforded greater epistemic power, they are able to demand testimony from women that matches their own desires or preferences. Nonetheless, even if the gender of the interlocutors impacts the course of sexual negotiations, I hold that epistemic virtue will still encourage more mutualistic, autonomous, and co-creative sexual outcomes. The reason a *reductio*: if female and male interlocutors are always impaired by their gendered knowing, then I struggle to see how any epistemically virtuous man can ever fruitfully dialogue with a virtuous woman. Since I am committed to believing that men and women can fruitfully dialogue as an empirical fact, I am not convinced that gendered knowing truncates our ability to exercise epistemic virtue in sexual negotiation.

My objector may sidestep this *reductio* by highlighting the 'sexual' part of 'sexual negotiations.' Since sexuality is structured to favor men, epistemically virtuous dialogue between lovers will still favor men, even if dialogue can be fruitful in other contexts. While I agree that

⁵⁷ Code, 716.

prima facie this objection rings true, I emphasize how epistemic virtue develops over time, and how lovers can work over time to develop a mutual sexuality that works for them, and not just for the man. The point of dialogue is to continually mold the sexual scripts under which a couple realize sex towards being more mutualistic and pleasurable. At the onset of a couple's sexual development together, they may indeed have sex that favors the man in an unjust way, even in the presence of epistemic virtue. The continual practice of dialogue, however, will encourage the female partner to open up about her desires, to which virtuous partners will respond enthusiastically.

The notion that partners can have co-equality while engaging in physical domination is coherent with the lived experiences of people in the BDSM community. MacKinnon condemns BDSM as an extreme enactment of archetypal heteronormativity,⁵⁸ but among ethical BDSM practitioners, I argue that BDSM is an exemplary case of what I am discussing. The language here is tricky, as it is undeniable that BDSM involves the dealing of physical harm to submissive partners in the form of, depending on the kinks being practiced, anything from spanking to cutting. While not necessarily endorsing these physical harms, I wish to draw a distinction between physical harms that aim to harm the receiver as an individual, and actions that cause physical harms that nonetheless aim to create an enjoyable erotic experience with full respect towards both individuals involved. When ethical BDSM is practiced, I argue the latter kind of physical harm characterizes the exchange, mitigating the moral wrongness of these harms insofar as they have positive outcomes that may balance out or exceed the wrongs of physical harm.

⁵⁸ MacKinnon, 324

The values of the BDSM community are to be safe, sane, and consensual. BDSM practices (practices involving power exchange, sadomasochism, bondage, and related practices) must be safe, unlikely to cause physical harm beyond the extent consented to, and not serious harm; sane, chosen with good information, while able to form sound judgements, and with awareness of potential risks (note the epistemic language); and consensual. Consent in BDSM is often constructed along the lines I have described. ‘Scenes,’ or sexual exchanges that pivot around BDSM practices, are discursively constructed by the dominant and submissive partner: both partners will frequently have a list of preferences, aversions, and apathies, and from these lists, partners mutually agree about what a scene will look like and what acts it will involve. Safe words or other indications that a boundary has been crossed are always employed, and ethical BDSM practitioners are responsive to their use. Finally, after a scene, ethical BDSM practitioners participate in ‘aftercare,’ during the time that vanilla sex calls the afterglow of sex. During aftercare, the dominant partner takes care of any wounds or other harms inflicted on the submissive partner, provides emotional and physical comfort to the submissive partner, and especially affirms their emotional and intimate connection. The submissive partner also plays a role in helping the dominant partner return to a normal headspace. Each of these elements of ethical BDSM I have mentioned belie the precise opposite of MacKinnon’s concerns. Even though these practices involve explicit use of physical harm, the metaphysical and relational background against which these practices happen are aimed at humanizing both partners and in ensuring a relationally, if not physically, egalitarian exchange. Taking the use of safe words for example, in an instance of dominance and submission proper, the submitter has no recourse to escape their experiences of being dominated. Since the ‘dom’ is responsive to the use of safe

words, clearly they respect the autonomy of the ‘sub,’ and wish only to provide the kinds of physical contact that promote, rather than harm, a successful erotic experience. One might object that co-equality alongside physical domination is no longer arousing: when MacKinnon says domination is arousing, she means domination of the metaphysical kind. I respond by reminding the objector that people in the BDSM community, as a matter of fact, experience sexual arousal when engaging in metaphysically egalitarian yet physically dominating sexual exchanges.

By way of closing, I submit a pair of categories that mimic genuine domination and submission in appearance, but happen against a background of equality and mutual care: domishnation and schubmission. Domishnating acts are those acts we often employ in sex that involve treating another body with force, but this force is only enacted for epistemically sound reasons and comes from a desire to co-create an enjoyable erotic experience. No coercion or dealing of personal harm is involved. Schubmission is the receiving of domishnating acts, such that a partner is treated with some amount of force, but that force digs no deeper than the skin, insofar as their emotional and relational experience is autonomous and empowering.

Nonetheless, I should emphasize that in my image of a morally outstanding sexuality, none of domination, submission, domishnation, nor schubmission are present, insofar as while domishnation and schubmission may be justified by the amount of erotic satisfaction provided, achieving that same amount of erotic satisfaction without physical harms is certainly best.

Unfortunately, if we agree with MacKinnon that sexuality is inextricable from some amount of power exchange, perhaps the best way we can achieve erotic satisfaction is through domishnation and schubmission, which at least avoids the serious harms of dehumanization and coercion.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have established a series of important conceptual links between themes in epistemology and sexuality. First, I highlighted why knowledge of sexuality itself is important in sexual exchanges. Second, I discussed how communication is a key component of having enjoyable sex. Third, I pointed to a way that communication can go astray and cause epistemic and sexual harms against women by attaching the phenomenon of fake orgasms to testimonial concerns. In doing so, I introduced a novel concept called performative smothering, which happens when someone is unable to share their knowledge because they know that their hearer will not uptake their testimony (mere smothering), and they proffer some testimony that contradicts their experiences to gratify the hearer. Then, I discussed how the presence of fake orgasms or other instances of epistemic violence causes seemingly permissible sex to be wrong insofar as epistemic harms are inflicted on one partner. This conclusion coheres with MacKinnon's claim that much of the seemingly consensual sex in patriarchy is actually wrong. I concluded by criticizing MacKinnon: she is wrong to reduce our sexuality to merely sex as men and women. As indicated by the fact that someone's enacting of epistemic harms can cause bad sex, the practice of epistemic virtue, realized through honest, mutual, and open dialogue, can encourage good sex. Accordingly, our status as lovers has to do not only with our gender, but also with our status as knowers. We ought to know to cum better by coming to know better.

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